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# **RESISTING BODIES:**

**Vulnerability**

**as a site of emergence of  
post-pandemic ecologies**

**Royal College Of Art**

**2022**

**MA PRINT**

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**Words: 9828**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In 2020, four and half billion people were held physical and emotional hostages in an effort to curtail the spread of Coronavirus. The magnitude of this confinement had never been experienced. In this essay, I investigate how the mesh of such disorientating and intimate experiences of isolation may paradoxically offer an effective framework to collectively rethink our relationship to others and Nature.

I will use personal experiences as a starting point to engage with resonating critical ideas, that I will situate in relation to my own insights in order to develop an argumentation in two stages: first, identify the origin and nature of the interconnections that underlie our social and natural ecosystems. Then, suggest new approaches that may form the ethical foundation of more sustainable ways to live together.

Yet, this essay is not a comprehensive and prescriptive catalogue of what our response to the pandemic ought to be. On the contrary, it will convey my belief that agility and openness are most efficient to navigate the radical unpredictability that characterises our post-pandemic world. The open-ended explorations exposed in this essay are subject by their very nature to being revisited, questioned and eventually invalidated, in the constant reshaping of a co-created future.

**KEYWORDS:** Anthropocene, post-pandemic ecologies, New Materialism, politics, body-as-a-site-of-knowledge.

## INTRODUCTION

Before the pandemic started, my practice consisted in the creation of everyday objects 'with a twist', objects slightly modified in ways that stripped them of their functionality. After a year of frantically producing such 'things', without a conscious line of inquiry in mind, I was made aware of their commonality by my tutor, Helen Cammock: all my objects had been designed to be defective, damaged, dysfunctional... useless. This is when I understood that my investigation revolved around the 'function of uselessness', or how I framed it later, the potential of vulnerability as a site of knowledge and creativity.

Eerily, the myriad of questions that the pandemic raised when it started - for me personally and for a number of critical thinkers, echoed the investigation that was then embodied in my practice: may our newly perceived vulnerability be seen as an effective condition for the creation of new and more sustainable ways of living together? I will argue that it does indeed and suggest that one may see, from a place of reconciliation with uncertainty and vulnerability, innovative solutions emerge more effectively.

Confinement is a measure of last resort, a wretched acknowledgment of one's collective powerlessness. To me, it seems like an anachronistic device. It evokes the sheltered yet captive *Decameron* storytellers, sharing tales while hiding away from the Black Death in Florence, in 1348.<sup>1</sup> Edgar Allan Poe's *Masque of the Red Death* too comes to mind, and his records of times when 'scarlet stains (...) were the pest ban which shut [the victim] out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men.'<sup>2</sup>

Yet, what the 2020 and 2021 confinements manifested is a vulnerability very much of our time. Barely materialised in a peril that is invisible yet ubiquitous and out of our control, the Coronavirus propagation mimics another tight and pulsating web that affects humanity as a

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (Penguin UK, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Masque of the Red Death* (Creative Education, 1991).

whole: globalisation. Nomadic and imperceptible, polymorphous and unstable, the contemporary threats are operating in entirely new ways: the nature and scope of their reach seem to be mirroring a world that has been made levelled, homogenised by hegemonic forces that live a life of their own. Worldwide menaces such as pandemics, terrorism, global warming and cyber violence remind me of the merciless acts of comeuppance found in the Bible. While I think of globalisation as a human construction, I wonder whether our creature may have escaped us, now imprisoned in domestic cells and paralysed by the very reality that we have created, as did Mary Shelley's:<sup>3</sup> witnessing inhabitants of the so-called 'free world' undergoing a systemic atomization of their physical contacts, I think of the (then?) dystopian Asimov's *Naked Sun* and its world where humans are taught from birth to avoid personal contact, a world where people no longer touch each other.<sup>4</sup> Wondering how we got there, I think of Petronius's *Satyricon*, of the cynicism and greediness of decadent powers, relentlessly planting the seeds of their own destitution.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay, I will investigate the Coronavirus crisis beyond its fortuitous causes (a virus passed from animal to human or leaked from a laboratory, or else) to look into its origins, following Hannah Arendt.<sup>6</sup> I am wondering whether, rather than accidental, this crisis may be seen as the necessary consequence of the *status quo*, revealing its unsustainable nature. In my opinion, what such intangible menace to our bodies paradoxically materialises is a sense of disconnection to those very bodies, that has been brought on by globalisation and capitalism. It also reveals the extent to which we have found ourselves helplessly estranged to both Nature and one another. Striking image of billions of people secluded within the four walls of their homes, closed frontiers and doors, that may be seen as a sad and poetic metaphor for the very concrete alienation undergone by contemporary populations since the middle of the 20th century: while machines and markets escape conscious governance to an ever growing extent, the individuals, stripped off the protective skins of communities, traditions and families, find themselves more and more exposed yet more and more isolated, flayed bodies and souls. This is the subject area I will develop in Part I.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus* (Wordsworth Editions, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Asimov, *The Naked Sun* (Random House Worlds, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Petronius Arbiter, *The Satyricon* (Digireads.com, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Penguin Classics, 2017).

While forcing such acknowledgement, this crisis also raised an awareness of how interconnected we are with both one another and with Nature, and the vulnerability that arises from such entanglements: this will be covered in Part II.

With economies and travels brought to a halt, hyperactive megapoles suddenly empty and silent, population shutting down and locking up, the COVID-19 crisis may paradoxically open a space for what was still very recently an unthinkable opportunity. It may create the conditions for a radical individual and collective transformation, that we will investigate in Part III: how can an acknowledgment of such interconnection and of our materiality and entanglements to others and Nature can help us understand how to contribute to the emergence of a new social order?

The pandemic is a portal.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 'Arundhati Roy: "The Pandemic Is a Portal" | Free to Read', *Financial Times*, 3 April 2020.

## I. HOW WE GAVE BIRTH TO A MONSTER

‘La peste apportait à la vie de tous un élément d’insolente égalité’...<sup>8</sup> It is a widely shared vision that pandemics, as natural disasters, do not discriminate. They are rather usually thought of as ‘equal opportunity calamities’ that are blind to age, race, gender or class. Yet, such disasters do not occur in historical, political, social, or economic vacuums. Rather, the consequences of such catastrophes reveal existing inequalities while replicating and exacerbating their effects:<sup>9</sup> the most vulnerable populations in our system (the elderly, those who could not afford to withdraw from working life to protect themselves from the pandemic) were the most dangerously exposed to the virus and died in number. The Coronavirus crisis unveiled the extreme inequalities of our economic and social systems. It holds the great virtue of having shed a crude light on the inner sides of folds, the blind spots of our practices, the hidden aspects of our ways of life. On what goes on in the backstage of the ‘joyful globalisation’.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, we find we may have a distorted view of society that meshes well with the ingrained myths that founded liberalism.<sup>11</sup> The usual course of action is to ignore the conditions of hardship and struggles of the most fragile populations outside of the unusual circumstances produced by a crisis (inadequate access to health and child care, low wages, no right to sick leave, job and housing insecurity). But ‘there are times when the true character of our society reveals itself and the brutality of our social hierarchy is laid bare’.<sup>12</sup> Times that bring into stark relief the importance of political institutions and economic ideologies that are at play, especially when these underlying structures may directly be responsible for the emergence of such catastrophes. Times and events that ‘wash away the surface of society’ and ‘expose the underlying power structures, the injustices, the patterns of corruption and the unacknowledged inequalities.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, *The Abyss* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> Jean Ait Belkhir and Christiane Charlemaine, ‘Race, Gender and Class Lessons from Hurricane Katrina’, *Race, Gender & Class*, 14.1/2 (2007), 120–52.

<sup>10</sup> Alain Minc, *La mondialisation heureuse: La France sera-t-elle le mauvais élève de la modernité ? Elle mérite mieux* ((Pocket) réédition numérique FeniXX, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> John P. Safranek, *The Myth of Liberalism* (CUA Press, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Haymarket Books, *How to Beat Coronavirus Capitalism*, 2020  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lxwLHRKaB0>> [accessed 29 May 2022].

<sup>13</sup> David Brooks, ‘Opinion | Katrina’s Silver Lining’, *The New York Times*, 8 September 2005, section Opinion <<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/08/opinion/katrinassilver-lining.html>> [accessed 29 May 2022].



When the hurricane struck the Gulf and the floodwaters rose and tore through New Orleans, plunging its remaining population into a carnival of misery, it did not turn the region into a Third World country, as it has been disparagingly implied in the media—it revealed one. It revealed the disaster within the disaster. Gruelling poverty rose to the surface like a bruise to our skin.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, 'Reality Has Endorsed Bernie Sanders', *The New Yorker*, 30 March 2020 <<https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/reality-has-endorsed-bernie-sanders>> [accessed 29 May 2022].

## 1. The objectivised subject

The Coronavirus crisis may not be of a biological nature, but rather a crisis of our systems, partially grounded in the commodification of all aspects of our lives, including sickness.

Over the course of the last century, our means of production and the relationships that govern them have undergone a significant paradigm shift, with consequences both diverse in nature and staggering in scope. The invention of the steam engine by James Watt in 1784 precipitated the industrial age while substituting unscalable human labour for illimited mechanical force. Colonisation legalised and systemized brutal requisitioning practices and appropriation by a limited number of countries of resources worldwide. With the emergence of new distribution channels and the generalisation of indirect sourcing, globalisation resulted in greater opacity and complexity of the supply-chain. While to some this environment held great potential to lift millions of people out of poverty, the rampant unregulated competition and practises that ensued have led to unprecedented levels of human exploitation, as well as pollution, health and safety hazards, threats to local cultural identities and the foreseeable disappearance of traditional lifestyles and crafts worldwide. 'The real pandemic here [may be] Capitalism.'<sup>15</sup>

In parallel, consumption has undergone its own revolution. With the emergence of 'public relations',<sup>16</sup> the consequential concerted effort by corporations to shift consumption patterns from a 'need-based' to a 'desire/pleasure-based' paradigm and the tyranny of advertising discourses, individuals have found themselves growingly trapped in the belief that happiness and freedom can be found in the resolution of tensions through consumption, which holds them as unaware hostages of manipulation, insatiability and alienation to the new, continual dissatisfaction and anxiety about a variety of insufficiencies.

The common implication of these parallel mutations in production, distribution and consumption patterns has been a widespread instrumentalisation of human beings, turned

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<sup>15</sup> Haymarket Books, *How to Beat Coronavirus Capitalism*.

<sup>16</sup> Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda* (Ig Publishing, 2005).

Capitalism Is The Disease.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Haymarket Books, *Capitalism Is The Disease: Mike Davis on the Coronavirus Crisis*, 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOp9G5hoQnM>> [accessed 29 May 2022].

into both productive and consuming agents. Capitalism has systemized and legitimised a predatory logic in which subjects can be seized as objects.

And indeed, Capitalism is *predatory* by nature. Its destructivity is embedded, it *predates* the crisis it creates. Capitalism does not operate in the register of longing, waiting, doing without, but rather has been built on exploitation. The growth of capitalist economies is rooted in the systematic sacrificing of 'assets' on economic grounds, on a significant scale (extermination of indigenous peoples and forests, slave trade, colonisation, post colonialist military intervention etc.). We experienced this again last year, while populations watched heated debates on TV, astounded yet wondering whether their parents and grand-parents should be sacrificed on the altar of economic growth.

'Capitalism is an economic model soaked in blood', and consequently 'our normal [has become] a crisis': uncontrollable bushfires in Australia and Europe, farmer-ignited fires devastating the Amazon rainforest, Hurricane Katrina, Coronavirus...<sup>18</sup> With the objectification of the subject, the foundation of an ethical relation to the Other ceased to operate. The subject, simultaneously devoid of its correlator absolute alterity, annihilated in its radical difference, became a seizable resource. The objectification of Nature as a whole and the unfolding of tyrannical relationships to the world ensued. Under these conditions, can we ever invent a new relationship to Nature and others 'besides reification, possession, appropriation, and nostalgia'?<sup>19</sup>

## 2. The body automated

Appropriation also characterises the Modern project, as is manifested by the systematisation of semiotic analysis - which aimed to establish a full-spectrum cognitive grasp and articulation of reality: a frenetic interest for machinerie marked the twentieth-century, that produced 'numerous emblems of this craving to develop more powerful machines, to observe them at work' and 'an increased presence of mechanical or

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<sup>18</sup> Haymarket Books, *How to Beat Coronavirus Capitalism*.

<sup>19</sup> Donna J. Haraway, 'Otherworldly Conversations; Terran Topics; Local Terms', in *Material Feminisms* (Indiana University Press, 2008).

(No more) stronghold against the times, (no more) fortification against the outside, (no more) shelter for those who are serene, for the eternal indifferents.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Stefan Zweig, *Seuls les vivants créent le monde* (Groupe Robert Laffont, 2020).

motorised devices in the functioning and organisation of the social sphere'.<sup>21</sup> The mechanistic view of the world that ensued did not spare the human body: the ongoing efforts to 'make the body semiotic'<sup>22</sup>- readable as a culturally intelligible sign - produced a distancing and objectifying relationship to it. As far as science is concerned, we are mechanical men and women. 'Blood pressure is hydraulics, strength is mechanics, nutrition is combustion, limbs are levers, joints are ball-and-sockets'.<sup>23</sup> While substituting the body-site-of-experience to a body-object-of-knowledge, we pushed away the body and kept it at a distance. In order to better examine, discern and dissect it, we kept it at bay, we objectified it. But in an alienating fascination for a body-object-of-mastery, we lost a seemingly irretrievable connection to our own singular, real bodies.

Similarly, the Modern project has disconnected humans from Nature. Natural science, concerned with the understanding of the natural world, has largely treated its nonhuman structures of studies as independent objects of subjective knowledge, without acknowledging the active role that their objects of study have played in the shaping of scientific observers and scientific knowledge themselves. This lack of acknowledgment also extends to the active role that the scientific process itself has had on its objects of study: what this crisis is showing is that living matters are neither merely objects of human construction, nor merely passive in front of their observers, but that these are rather highly entangled.<sup>24</sup>

### **3. Performance culture, cult of performance**

The panoply of machines that populate the 20th century also tells about our continuous efforts to rescind the body's limits and remedy its substantial shortfalls. A number of human endeavours sprung up from our desire to address our limitations and deny our shortcomings, to either compensate for or forget about our insufficiencies. Our hunger for

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<sup>21</sup> Philip G. Hadlock, 'Men, Machines, and the Modernity of Knowledge in Alfred Jarry's "Le Surmâle"', *SubStance*, 35.3 (2006), 131–48.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Mark Greif, 'Against Exercise', in *Against Everything: On Dishonest Times* (Verso Books, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).

The disaster is related to forgetfulness.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (U of Nebraska Press, 2015).

knowledge itself manifests a desire to master the universe: most techno-scientific leaps stem from the awareness of our flaws and lacks and from the corollary eagerness to identify solutions to address them.

There, the bare body was deemed inconvenient. And indeed, our corporeality constantly reminds us of our finitude: the word “vulnerability” comes from the Latin *vulnus*, “wound”. The perception is that our vulnerability is grounded in materiality. The body is limiting by nature. Bodies are high-maintenance, bodies are messy. Bodies get sick, bodies can’t be at different places at the same time. Bodies demand rest, bodies deteriorate with age. Great thoughts and efforts have been geared towards pushing further the boundaries of the body, to enhance, subjugate, replace it. How numerous and diverse in nature our armours, weapons, devices and tools! Planes, computers, medications. Satellites, cars, food supplements. Glasses, toothbrushes, helmets. In an attempt to cover up and forget our essentially limited nature, we have growingly disconnected ourselves from a body we try to keep at arm’s length: what we mostly expect from it is that it should make itself forgotten while functioning optimally and seamlessly, indefectible. Numerous successes fed the reassuring but misleading illusion that possibilities were endless, that with time all bridges could be crossed and gaps of all natures caulked. We have grown up with the idea that the sky was the limit. This is where the destructivity of our species lies.

The post-industrial era deepened the furrow, while importing vestiges of industrial equipment to put them to a new use: the optimization and fine-tuning of a dusted-off version of Descartes’s and La Mettrie’s machine-man. ‘The inclined planes, pins, levers, pulleys, locks, winches, racks, and belts of the Nautilus and aerobic machines put earlier stages of technical progress at our disposal in miniature’. In *Against Everything*, Mark Grief analyses the way in which ‘modern exercise makes (one) acknowledge the machine operating inside (one)self’ and ‘expresses a will (...) to discover and regulate the machine-like processes in (one’s) own body’.

Paradoxically, the body lost its corporeality/materiality/physicality in the process. ‘Rudimentary calculation is the fundamental technology’ of this new obsession for the grooming of our biological processes and the optimization of our bodies: as the weights that one lifts are counted, so are distances run, time exercised, heart rates elevated,



SAMANTHA : I truly love not to have a body. I am not limited, I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously, I'm not tethered to time and space in a way that I would be if I was stuck in a body that is inevitably going to die.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Spike Jones, *Her* (Warner Bros, 2013).

calories burnt. In exercise, one gets a sense of one's body as a compilation of numbers representing capabilities. The essential pieces of equipment of the contemporary workout are numbers: the body became an abstraction.<sup>27</sup> In *Réflexions sur la mesure*, Francois Dagognet outlines a philosophy of measurement and shows how the latter plays a central role in contemporary society. Today, an ever wider range of scientific and economic fields develop and growingly depend on measuring instruments, including medicine, meteorology and finance but also sociology, psychology, or the entertainment and sports industries, where scores, performances and statistics have attained a talismanic status.<sup>28</sup> We are becoming closely monitored numbered beings in a reality that is more and more articulated in metric terms, which are tyrannical by (binary) nature. The temptation toward perpetual preservation and the corollary obsession for optimization that ensued have made vulnerability the enemy. In pursuing perfection, we have engaged in a dehumanising enterprise of disembodiment. And while forging 'an immaterial world of flux and capabilities, supposedly more advanced than that of the old days, made of stocks and vulnerabilities',<sup>29</sup> we have lost touch with our essential material nature. As the crude lights of modernity threatened the delicate dispositions of traditional Japanese aesthetics towards the subtleties of shadows,<sup>30</sup> I fear that enlightened by an excess of Civilisation, we too risk losing our nuances. Medicalisation to the bitter end contributes to masking our intrinsic fragility and finitude. Transhumanism advocates an eerie engineering of bodies and a transformation of the human condition through technologies aimed at enhancing our capabilities. While doing so, it partakes in the creation of a distorted and fantasmagoric view of the body. In promoting a position that life is limitless, it perpetuates and aggravates the very lack of awareness of our own limitations that is endangering us. When our "new normal" depends on engineered genes, neuroscience and laser beams, when science is used for terrorist or predatory purposes, one understands the struggle that many experience around the nature and direction of "progress".

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<sup>27</sup> Greif.

<sup>28</sup> Gérard Chazal, 'Philosophy and Technology in the French Tradition. The Legacy of François Dagognet', in *French Philosophy of Technology: Classical Readings and Contemporary Approaches* (Springer, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> "Barbara Stiegler : « La crise due au coronavirus reflète la vision néolibérale de la santé publique »", *Le Monde.fr*, 9 April 2020

<[https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/04/09/barbara-stiegler-la-crise-due-au-coronavirus-reflete-la-vision-neoliberale-de-la-sante-publique\\_6036059\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/04/09/barbara-stiegler-la-crise-due-au-coronavirus-reflete-la-vision-neoliberale-de-la-sante-publique_6036059_3232.html)> [accessed 2 June 2022].

<sup>30</sup> Junichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (Random House, 2019).

There is a certain seamlessness between all the places where exercise is done and the sites where people are tested for illnesses, undergo repairs, and die. In the doctor's office, the blood lab, and the hospital, you are at the mercy of counting experts. A lab technician in a white coat takes a sample of blood. A nurse tightens a cuff on your arm, links you to an EKG, takes the basic measurements of your height and weight—never to your satisfaction. She rewards you with the obvious numbers for blood pressure body-fat ratio, height and weight. The clipboard with your numbers is passed. At last the doctor takes his seat, a mechanic who wears the white robe of an angel and is as arrogant as a boss. In specialist language, exacerbating your dread and expectation, you may learn your numbers for cholesterol (two types), your white cells, your iron, immunities, urinalysis, and so forth. He hardly needs to remind you that these numbers correlate with your chances of survival.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Greif.

With this crisis though, the very core of our Modern tale is being subjected to reevaluation. The reactions the crisis triggered materialise a growing displacement of our blind faith in science and technology, the very foundations of the Age of Enlightenment. After the triumph of a previously unquestioned project, our devices of maintenance and security are now revealed in their fragility, and so is revealed our intrinsic vulnerability in the process.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming', in *The Poems* (Springer, 1991).

## II. WHEN THE CREATURE IS TURNING AGAINST ITS CREATOR

### 1. Acknowledging our entanglements with Nature and others

The etymology of the word 'object' suggests objects are irreducibly distant from us. It is misleading. On the contrary, 'objects are irreducibly close, despite their reputation for being background beings', sitting in front of us. In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, Timothy Morton deploys the term he had previously coined<sup>33</sup> to call attention to the large-scale bodies that simultaneously envelop and flow within other bodies, including human ones, in a pulsating, startling 'open-ended mesh'. Despite the immanent 'hereness' of hyperobjects, we mostly live in oblivion of the power of these massive entities, that are too large to be seen in full and almost impossible to 'be held in mind'. They frighten and captivate as much as they evade understanding. Yet, their reality does without our acknowledgment. Hyperobjects already have significant and concrete impacts on human social and intimate spaces: they are directly responsible for the 'end of (our) world'.

What are these mysterious bodies whose essence and extent can not be grasped, whose presence can not be perceived yet can not be dismissed? Whose causes and effects are unclear? Ultraviolet rays, global warming, nuclear radiations, oil spills, black holes, Hurricane Katrina. Capitalism. Coronavirus. These seemingly heterogeneous items have numerous properties in common. They are viscous, they 'stick' to beings that are involved with them. They are 'nonlocal': everywhere yet nowhere. Morton draws his portrayal of hyperobjects and their operating mode by describing a number of these phenomena. For example, ultraviolet rays that burn our skin and alter our cells, revealing a tangible, aggressive intimacy of a global warming phenomenon that penetrates and materially affects our bodies' very structure, while we are busy arguing over its origin and factuality. Bodies of a paradoxical nature, indeed, and in many respects: invisible yet visible in the damage they produce, ubiquitous yet nowhere to be seen as such, abstract in their definition but concrete in their implications, immaterial but palpable in their effects,

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<sup>33</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

There we were, trolling along in the age of industry, capitalism, and technology, and all of a sudden we received information from aliens, information that even the most hard headed could not ignore.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (U of Minnesota Press, 2013).

transcendent yet immanent. 'The more data we have about hyperobjects the less we know about them—the more we realise we can *never* truly know them'. These bodies of a new genre, occurring naturally for some, direct outcomes of human manufacture for the others, are beyond definition, characterization, demonstration. Of this world yet truly 'alien', they can not be tamed. Nor can they ever be fully accessible to the grasp of humans. Their queer presence confronts us with the strangeness and foreignness of a world we built and thought was ours: while they make us aware of the entanglement of all things in our environment, of our great intimacy to our creation, they remind us how the monster we gave birth to escapes us, how ultimately unknowable and unseizable it is.<sup>35</sup> 'Today, more than ever before, it is apparent that humans and their systems are not the only agents on this planet'.<sup>36</sup> The implication of such awareness is that one can not go on as if human bodies and structures were not entangled in complex, dynamic, and still mostly mysterious active systems. Still mostly mysterious, or rather, intrinsically mysterious: these overwhelming entangled material forces precede and exceed human agency while operating on time and spatial scales that may very well remain beyond human reach.

By drawing light to these entanglements, our contemporary crisis (Coronavirus crisis, global warming, etc.) reveal the unsustainable nature of the Anthropocene era as we see it.<sup>37</sup> The impacts of our human systems extend far beyond our current understanding and acknowledgment. Under these circumstances, we need to invent new tools to apprehend our world and invent new ways of interacting with it.

## **2. Acknowledging the material nature of our entanglements**

In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett questions the widely shared vision of a 'partition of the sensible',<sup>38</sup> between dull matter (things considered passive and inert) and vibrant life

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<sup>35</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Nail, 'Kinopolitics', in *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).



We find ourselves, at the turn of the twenty-first century, in a world where every major domain of activity, from nature and society to the arts and sciences, has become increasingly defined by patterns of motion that precede and exceed human agency.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Nail.

(animate beings that 'acts or to which activity is granted by others').<sup>40</sup> Motivated by the political project to foster 'more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things', she suggests 'the quarantines of matter and life encourages us to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations' that run both alongside and inside humans, such as the way omega-3 fatty acids can alter moods, for example. By vitality, Bennett means the 'capacity of things - edible, commodities, storms, metals' - but also debris, minerals, viruses indeed - 'to impede or block the will and designs of humans'. To document her argument, she catalogues a number of fascinating phenomena that support the position that these deemed inert matters rather act as proper 'forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own'. What we considered passive objects, products of human construction, prove to be moved by autonomous principles which are heterogeneous to our agenda - and still widely mysterious to us.

What are the political implications of a greater collective awareness of the impacts that these autonomous 'actants' have on us? The term is Bruno Latour's: an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events. It is 'any entity that modifies another entity in a trial', something whose 'competence is deduced from [its] performance' rather than posited in advance of the action. If such 'vibrant materiality' was established indeed, if the transformative quality of a deemed inert material world was made more apprehensible, both our analysis and political responses to existing issues would likely be very different. For example, would patterns of consumption change if the remnant of such consumption - our rubbish - were not cast away and mostly hidden -or worst, deemed recycled- but rather was understood as the accumulating pile of the lively and potentially dangerous matter that it actually is? How would political responses to public issues change, were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bennett.

<sup>41</sup> Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

Of whom and of what indeed can I say: "I know that!" (...) All the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine. You describe it to me and you teach me to classify it. You enumerate its laws and in my thirst for knowledge I admit that they are true. You take apart its mechanism and my hope increases. At the final stage you teach me that this wondrous and multicoloured universe can be reduced to the atom and that the atom itself can be reduced to the electron. All this is good and I wait for you to continue. But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain this world to me with an image. I realise then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know. (...) I realise that if through science I can seize phenomena and enumerate them, I cannot, for all that, apprehend the world. <sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus And Other Essays* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012).

This new phase in our history starts with a traumatic loss of coordinates. What our coexistence with these creatures teaches us, is that the models we use to approach reality are obsolete, invalidated and that they need to be reformulated. The acknowledgment of an agency of materiality and of the potent intervention of matter opens up the possibility of a critical approach to our anthropocentric view of the world. To consider the affordances of things, not to disrupt human agency, but rather to strengthen it. Looking through the lens of materiality in our current crisis opens up a potential for new ideas pertaining to the tenets of our traditional orthodoxies. The crisis creates the conditions of a collective yet intimate experience of what it means to be 'stranger(s) to (ourselves) and to the world'. It fleshes out Camus's observation that our appetite for conquest is bound to 'bump into walls that defy its assaults'.<sup>43</sup> It shakes to the core a number of socially prescribed ideas pertaining to the notions of success, mastery, failure, impediments.

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<sup>43</sup> Camus.

ZENO

Someone awaits me elsewhere. I'm going to him.

HENRY-MAXIMILAN

Who? That old man, the Prior of Leon?

ZENO

*Hic Zeno. Myself.*<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Yourcenar.

### III. THINKING A RADICAL TOGETHERNESS: INVENTING NEW KINSHIPS FOR HUMANS AND NATURE

In the predatory logic that prevails in capitalist relationships, one may expect the recent Coronavirus crisis to be exploited with the aim to reinforce existing structures of power. Naomi Klein shows in *The Shock Doctrine* how crises have repeatedly been harnessed by elites to push through lists of pre-established policies aimed at reinforcing their positions. There is a long and documented track record of ‘disgraceful profiteering’, corporate opportunism, ‘daylight robbery of the public wealth’ and ‘enclosure of the Commons in the interest of the wealthy’ in times of disasters.<sup>45</sup> Already, cascades of funds have been showered on the corporate sector, that is being bailed-out while the burden of the risk is being offloaded onto the most vulnerable individuals, who can not afford to stop working in order to protect themselves from the pandemic. Already, we have been catapulted in what can be seen as a grim glimpse of the dystopia that the Silicon Valley would like to deliver to us: our social life and our children's education (via “distance learning”) are now being mediated by corporate platforms that are mining and surveying our personal relations, turning our conversations into profit centres. Our access to necessities also now growingly relies on their delivery by corporations that exposed their workers to potentially life-threatening situations (not equipping them with protective gears), making us in the process their unwilling accomplice.<sup>46</sup>

But this is not how we want to live.

While worst practices are being traded between those in power - against the backdrop of attacks on civil liberties, democratic rights and weaponization of the states in the name of security- the civil society is sharing strategies and ideas too, in order to be ready for the moment when what was ‘the political impossible, becomes inevitable’:<sup>47</sup> previously unthinkable solutions, ideas deemed too radical until very recently are starting to seem like

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<sup>45</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Penguin UK, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Haymarket Books, *How to Beat Coronavirus Capitalism*.

<sup>47</sup> Milton Friedman and Rose D. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, 1962).

We are in a battle of visions for how we're going to respond to this crisis. We will either be catapulted backward to an even more brutal winner-takes-all system — or this will be a wake-up call.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Haymarket Books, *How to Beat Coronavirus Capitalism*.

the only reasonable path to get out of this crisis and prevent future ones. Voices are rising, calling for a 'viral uprising'.<sup>49</sup>

### **1. Develop and cultivate an 'interactionist view of the world'**

As we have seen in Part II, humans and their social structures are caught up in much larger-than-them beings which are driven by their own autonomous and mysterious logic, yet to be discovered (or not) and eventually studied (or only partially) across a range of disciplines. Our systems are shot through and surrounded by these other beings in such a manner that the traditional ontological divisions separating the natural from the humanly constructed, the biological from the cultural, no longer operate. These erroneous/obsolete categories need to be replaced with a new framework that acknowledges the interweaving and dynamically co-constitutive nature of beings. Neither Realism, which approaches reality as a series of entities and processes independent from human representations, nor Social Constructivism, which claims they are emergent from human systems, seem fit ontologies to account for the complexity of interactions which are at play. The way we apprehend the world needs a radical refoundation.

In *Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina*, Nancy Tuana develops the notion of 'emergent interplay', which precludes a sharp divide between ontological categories and calls attention to the 'in-between of the complex interrelations from which phenomena emerge'. She develops the conceptual metaphor of 'viscous porosity' as a tool to better understand the 'rich interactions between beings through which subjects are constituted, out of relationality'.

<sup>50</sup> Inspired by the whiteheadian idea that reality is made of complex processes continuously evolving and emerging from a dynamic relationality,<sup>51</sup> she advocates an

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<sup>49</sup> Haymarket Books, *How to Beat Coronavirus Capitalism*.

<sup>50</sup> Nancy Tuana, 'Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina', in *Material Feminisms* (Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>51</sup> Whitehead argued that reality consists of processes rather than material objects, and that processes are best defined by their relations with other processes, thus rejecting the theory that reality is fundamentally constructed by fixed, inert and autonomous bits of matter that exist independently of one another.



The challenge of what is now being called ‘posthumanism’ or ‘new materialism’ (...) is to provide a new theoretical framework to help us think through the entangled continuity of human and nonhuman agencies that now confront us. (...) The sciences, just as much as the humanities, therefore require a new theoretical foundation that takes seriously the collective agency of humans and nonhuman systems as dimensions of something else—of what I call ‘kinetic systems’. The anthropocentric project has come to an end.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas Nail.

'interactionist' view of the world that acknowledges the porosity of entities, the unstable essence of beings<sup>53</sup> and the agency of materiality.

## **2. Develop an intimate understanding of the meaning of an agency of materiality**

To introduce this chapter I would like to share a personal seemingly trivial experience that is unexpectedly shaking my view of the world to the core. Slime indeed has brought a revolution into my home. Everywhere around me, a spellbound youth hooked on Youtube tutorials is being taught the rudiments of slime production. To my great dismay, my own household and offspring were not spared: slime cast a spell on my daughter, too: it has penetrated every nook and cranny of my apartment, slowly yet ruthlessly. My knee-jerk reaction to it was that of immediate repulse. Slime is gooey. Gluey, gummy, soggy. It is squishy, squashy, squidgy, slushy. Slime is colourful. Slime is glittery. It adheres to everything on its path and sounds the death knell for everything that it sticks to: carpet, couches, clothes, walls. And I have enough to do already dealing with a tyrannic domesticity, source of perpetual need for care. Exhausting alienation, telling of a visceral urge to preserve the family and household ecosystems, where the laws of time and entropy reign supreme, relentlessly threatening their integrity and order. Overwhelmed by the surge, I opted for surrender. And I kept wondering why, while my generation loved building towers with Legos, our children obsess over shapeless and memoryless bits of matter that serve no use except being themselves, until they become something else? What on earth does a trend of such mysterious nature and extent may manifest?

I suggest the following: while segregating human bodies from one another and humans from Nature, this recent crisis deepened a pre-existent collective longing for a more haptic grasp of the world. I believe that the slime mania exhibits the craving of this generation for a tactile engagement with a more palpable reality. It may reveal that fundamental needs are being overlooked. The fascination may bear a meaning beyond the trend, manifesting

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<sup>53</sup> William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (Good Press, 2019).

As the word pours out – I am speaking it out repeatedly as I write – I feel its ooze rise between my tongue and teeth, before it moves back into the air pockets in my cheeks, pushes its way back over the tips of my teeth and out into space between my mouth and the screen of the computer. The word seeps its way forth, slowly, inch by inch, to impress itself onto my digital writing space.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> 'J C Kristensen – Pockets of Slime | Tenderfoot'  
<<https://tenderfoot.co.uk/invitations-archive/j-kristensen-slime/>> [accessed 2 June 2022].

an urgent collective crave for both thoughtlessness, uselessness and a more haptical sensoriality. It may reveal the needs of subjects already excessively immersed in “on-screen” narratives and relationships, taking place in all pervasive digital landscapes.

I believe slime also partakes of an unconscious collective strategy of resistance. A tactic (un)shaped to escape exogenous motives and expectations for achievement, formulated by an imagined aggregate “other” that informs our social interactions and choices - including the most intimate ones.<sup>55</sup> While engaging frantically with slime, children are effectively politicising the body as a site of critical resistance to overwhelming ideologies. Indeed, slime emerges on its own terms and cannot be instrumentalized. Slime develops along its own path. Slime is a relief. Slime is political! Slime, through its ‘memoryless, non-identical identity’ exerts a quiet dominance capable of opposing the injunctions and splintering impermeable hard bodies, be it that of parent and school rules or contemporary ideologies, such as neoliberalism. Slime, ‘with no stability in its form’, a ‘substrate which never stabilises’ is prising all of them open and oozing through them silently.<sup>56</sup> The face of political resistance has changed already.

### **3. Disability is the norm**

Our condition is grounded in corporeality and our fragility lies in our dependence to the material world to survive. Yet, this does not merely mean that we have a body and that we are mortals: without health there is no freedom, no desire, no joy; the Self is circumscribed within the limits of the ‘extraordinary plasticity of corporeality’. It is through coming to terms with this corporeality that we can experience the ‘soothing acquiescence’ of our own limits, which eases the pressures and allows for a renewed relationship to the world.<sup>57</sup> Engage with our vulnerability through an experience in the flesh, to allow for the refoundation of systems, once built on the illusionary and dangerous project to deny it. This is how materiality becomes political. How it becomes a critical force, a powerful investigative lens for reexamining and critiquing our capitalist, colonial and patriarchal frameworks. And this

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<sup>55</sup> Kim Tallbear, ‘Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family’, in *Making Kin Not Population* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> ‘J C Kristensen – Pockets of Slime | Tenderfoot’.

<sup>57</sup> William Clapier, *Effondrement ou révolution ?* (Le Passeur, 2020).

Disability is a universal experience of humanity.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> I. K. Zola, 'Toward the Necessary Universalizing of a Disability Policy.', *The Milbank Quarterly*, 1989 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1468-0009.2005.00436.X>>.

is how our current crisis debunks the traditional orthodoxies of our Western canons through the impetus it *created* to revisit our prescriptive value sets and ideas. This is how it holds the tremendous potential to open up possibilities to think critically and eventually disrupt its own hegemonic stereotypes and stifling ideologies, in a paradoxical movement.<sup>59</sup>

The tyranny of metrics revolutionised the territory of self-care, trapping us in the process in ‘an era of exercise (that) has brought more obsession and self-hatred rather than less’. Consumed by the project of preserving our ‘living corpses’ in an optimal state, we tend to lose ourselves in a never-ending ‘distraction from living, that comes with endless life-maintenance’.<sup>60</sup> The abrupt halt in our routines that several lockdowns imposed may offer a chance to reflect on that. The crisis created the unforeseeable and exceptional conditions for a collective experience that may prove a salutary reminder of the essential character of our finitude. It may amplify existing voices that advocate an alternative relationship to our imperfections. Rather than succumbing to the temptation of perpetually enhancing the body, these voices foreground the project of a reconciliation with its essential incompleteness, proposing to step off the aspirational wheel and focus on the awkwardness and boundaries of the subject, rather than on its shortcomings and yearnings.

While promoting functionality throughout, Capitalism produced the definition and wide dissemination of both explicit and implicit standards and norms relating to spaces, objects and practices. Emily Barker is a Los-Angeles-based artist working in sculpture and installation, who challenges the concept of standardised spaces, insofar as they prohibit access for those with disabilities. Her work aims to shed light on the connection that she suggests exists between global Capitalism and what she sees as an excessive stride towards normativity. She explores the widely adopted yet exclusionary design normative principles that shape our built environments. Purposely lacking to consider the presence of

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<sup>59</sup> Shehnaz Suterwalla, ‘18-10-19 Morning Session’ (presented at the Abundance and Abstinence CHS School of Design platform lecture Series, Royal College of Art, London, 2019).

<sup>60</sup> Greif.

Imagine an obstacle. Imagine an obstacle created in the design of every object built into existence. Imagine a hierarchy of needs and yours never being met.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> 'Built to scale' (exhibition) Murmurs, Los Angeles: December 14, 2019 - January 18, 2020

bodies that age, bear children or are disabled, these principles distort our perception of “normalcy” while influencing it negatively. By calling attention to these standards, she aims to reveal how they embody and perpetuate structural prejudices toward people considered “abnormal”, while exacerbating the gap when they should aim to mitigate it. Arguing that bodies that are programmed to deteriorate with time cannot ‘stay in the narrow confinement of normativity forever’, she postulates that disability as we understand it (disability as exception) is a social construct, or as one could also rephrase it, disability is the norm.<sup>62</sup> This is also what Tom Shakespeare means when referring to “the fragile continuum of impairment that constitutes the human experience.”<sup>63</sup>

This structural violence is allowed to continue as people are railroaded to forget that being ‘able bodied’ is a temporary privilege. Claiming after Lennard Davis that ‘the hegemony of normalcy is, like other hegemonic practices, so effective because of its invisibility’,<sup>64</sup> Barker urges us to consider how criteria of normality all together are both ill-adapted to living bodies that are constantly changing and detrimental to society. Forceful standardisation informs our value systems as much as our social interactions and effectively reinforces existing structures of power. By unveiling their *modus operandi* and purpose of self perpetuation, one may be able to disrupt these structures and to dismantle the wider ideological foundations that underlie them. Awareness is the new weapon.

In a poignant account of the welfare benefit system reorganisation that took place in the UK over the last twenty years, Diana Rose maps out the emergence of a ‘hidden activism’ ‘whereby the most disenfranchised of citizens try to fight back’. One aspect of this reorganisation had been the introduction of “Work Capability Assessments”, which aimed to establish different categories of disabled people, based on their ‘fitness to work’. Those found ‘fit for work’ joined the existing ranks of the unemployed while the others were placed in the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG) and given a duty to attend various activities aimed at making them ‘work ready’. Rose exposes how the assessment process was devised and used by successive governments to get ‘disabled people back to work’, when the strategy consisting in putting tens of thousands of them on invalidity benefit (in

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<sup>62</sup> ‘Built to Scale’ (exhibition) Murmurs, Los Angeles: December 14, 2019 - January 18, 2020

<sup>63</sup> Adam Benjamin, *Making an Entrance: Theory and Practice for Disabled and Non-Disabled Dancers* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>64</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (Verso, 1995).



Those who deviate from the norms have little space built to include them and can't participate in most built environments.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> 'Built to Scale' (exhibition) Murmurs, Los Angeles: December 14, 2019 - January 18, 2020

order to cut the unemployment numbers) proved too costly. Although this policy was developed on grounds exogenous to the wellbeing and agency of disabled people, an ideological shift pertaining to individual responsibility was promoted in a cynical attempt to support the tactical shift, whereby work was redefined as a “health outcome”. The implication was that not working was framed as a psychological condition and 2015 saw the apparition of psychologists in job centres in England. Coercive welfare policies forcing therapy on individuals with disabilities, under the threat of financial sanctions, were engineered to urge them to stride for recovery (normality). This raised intense protest and debates revolving around the concepts of ‘recovery’ and ‘normalcy’, as well as the desirability of normalisation for individuals and for the collective. The forms of resistance which these policies have prompted display diverse positions. ‘Mental health service users want equity without normalisation’, notes Rose. Recovery in The Bin (RiTB) rejects employment as cure or as an objective all must aspire to and insists that remaining un-recovered is a valid prerogative, in an environment where one is prompted to justify one’s existence with one’s usefulness to the economy.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, MadPride is campaigning to propose a new meaning for the polemic term: ‘recovery need not mean ‘being normal’ but accepting your madness and making the most of it when you can, often because you have first-hand experience allowing support to others when in similar distress’.<sup>67</sup>

#### **4. Coming to terms with the wound**

In my practice, I explore such questions with installations that stage objects hindered in their ability to perform their function, any function. Motivated by the political project of a rehabilitation of the deemed dysfunctional, I create useless, preposterous objects and “things”. Through this gesture, I am investigating the question whether lessons can be learnt from an engagement with broken objects. Thinking about the worth of the disable, the irrelevant, the absurd may help us to overcome our own fantasies of feeling damaged, inadequate or irrelevant. Can our confrontation with rehabilitated broken objects help us

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<sup>66</sup> ‘RiTB – Key Principles’, *Recovery in the Bin*, 2016 <<https://recoveryinthebin.org/ritbkeyprinciples/>> [accessed 2 June 2022].

<sup>67</sup> Diana Rose, ‘A Hidden Activism and Its Changing Contemporary Forms: Mental Health Service Users / Survivors Mobilising’, *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 6.2 (2018), 728–44 <<https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v6i2.952>>.

The professional literature focuses on 'guiding' the person to a position of 'hope' (...) where they can take their place in society and in particular where they can work. This has been conceptualised as a form of 'normalisation', as forcing people to be as like the image of the 'normal' citizen as possible.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Rose.

find solace, come to terms with our own wounds? Could such an encounter with the disconcerting strengthen, rather than disrupt, our agency?

Personal episodes of loss formed the impetus to investigate the notion of absence: most people are familiar with the invasiveness and the power of contamination that characterise the all-pervading, ever present, obliterative, all-devouring black (w)hole that feeds on everything it touches, like a vortex. Absence operates in a wide range of modes. Oozing, through a rabid, self-inflicted duty of remembrance, or erupting from spontaneous, seemingly exogenous, manifestations of trauma: the landscape of grief is a rugged terrain and its topography a complex one. How could such a territory – a vast void with no boundary and no proper characteristic, a territory made of negative space, to the exclusion of everything else – be mapped, shared and eventually circumscribed?

The traumatic event resonates beyond its acknowledged temporal and physical boundaries, through an incarnation in the object. Remnants of its occurrence are being carried through in time and brought close in space through the imprint. The object becomes the deserted field where past contacts, accidents and gestures are being captured and recorded, a gate to memory, an archive in its own right simultaneously manifesting presence and absence, the touch and the loss.<sup>69</sup> Events are embedded in objects, through vestiges and traces of all sorts, stains, scars, breaches. Events are also embodied in objects left behind by loved ones, radiant transitional objects imbued with 'aura' and meanings that expand them.<sup>70</sup> Vibrating objects of the personal archive, saturated with narratives that exceed their tangible boundaries, throbbing matrices materialising absence and shaping the experience of lack.

In the Jewish mourning ritual, mourners rip a piece of the clothes they wear during the funeral ceremony, as a re-enactment of the separation (the unravelling) they have helplessly undergone and the subsequent loss they suffer, allowing them to express their

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<sup>69</sup> André Gunthert, 'Georges DIDI-HUBERMAN, "La ressemblance par contact. Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte", in G. Didi-Huberman (dir.), *L'Empreinte*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997, p. 15-192.', *Études photographiques*, 3, 1997 <<https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/146>> [accessed 2 June 2022].

<sup>70</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (Penguin UK, 2009).

In the version of grief we imagine, the model will be "healing." A certain forward movement will prevail. The worst days will be the earliest days (...). Nor can we know ahead of the fact (and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

feeling of being torn apart through a positive act that materialises their emotional wound. That gesture of destruction is paradoxically intended to help mourners 'hold things together'. It is the visibility of the wound, rather than its denial or erasure, that allows for a reconciliation with the traumatic event that is being accounted for. The intervention of materiality eases this acknowledgment. It is a new affordance for the seam, which offers a metaphorical closure in addition to a literal one, circumscribing the threat, so to speak: while closing open wounds, suturing is building a new structure. While exploring that space, the dialectic tension between togetherness and separation, entanglement and unravelling, structure and breakdown to which the object attests, the play between 'here' and 'gone', I understood how rubbing salt on the injury creates a cicatrising acknowledgement, a re-processing of the traumatic event, possibly allowing for a new relationship to it.

## **5. Taking responsibility for our shared future**

Parallels have long been drawn between the organisation of our neuronal system and socioeconomic organisations: the brain has often been referred to using metaphors in the register of command and government, described as the sole leader of a centralised centre of decision, a governance commanding and organising, a computer (a conductor) that works from the top down, giving orders, controlling substance production, gestures, emotions, and behaviours.

Recent research shattered this perspective, though. The operating mode that is being progressively elucidated by modern neuroscience is that of a brain-machine that "learns, differentiates itself, reconstructs itself", briefly put, a machine that "privileges the event over the law."<sup>72</sup> This new model for the brain emerges in a particular context. It does so while our economic and social environments too undergo a radical upheaval, moving away from highly hierarchical systems overseen by centralised authority to flatter auto-organisations 'at once dynamic, multipolar and adaptive to circumstances'. Decision-making centres are being distributed and networks recompose themselves

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<sup>72</sup> Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (Fordham Univ Press, 2009).

To talk about the plasticity of the brain means to see in it not only the creator and receiver of form but also an agency of disobedience to every constituted form, a refusal to submit.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Malabou.

constantly according to fast shifting goals and tasks. Adaptability seems to have become the main requirement to succeed in our socioeconomic organisations.

These two shifts co-occur in time and it is striking to observe the extent to which our new understanding of how the brain operates “deeply coincides with the current face of capitalism.” Catherine Malabou points to what she sees as not only an analogy between socioeconomic and cerebral organisation models but rather as a mirroring *relationship* between them, affecting one another, so to speak by “contagion”. I too believe that the observation of our progress in neurosciences, and in particular the exploration of notions it unravels, such as that of plasticity, may help us grasp what our social organisation is or rather what it *could* be.

The thesis of an entirely genetically determined, directing organ being challenged by that of supple and adaptable series of mechanisms opens up the possibility to think of a *continuity* of our personality through environmental changes. For plasticity is not flexibility. While flexibility is required for *submitting*, plasticity is required for *adapting*.

Meanwhile, plasticity directly contradicts rigidity. It is its exact antonym. In ordinary speech, it designates suppleness, a faculty for adaptation, the ability to evolve. According to its etymology—from the Greek *plassein*, to mould—the word plasticity has two basic senses: it means at once the capacity to *receive form* (clay is called plastic, for example) and the capacity to *give form* (as in the plastic arts or in plastic surgery).<sup>74</sup>

The brain is thus both ‘formable’ and ‘formative’. But not only that. The plasticity of the brain may also be heard as its capacity to destroy (as in French *plastiquer* - to destroy through explosion). Plasticity is the ability to take form, create form and destroy form at the same time. It allows deformation (brought about by the environment) without denaturation. The plastic substance may be transformed, yet not lose its essence in the process, while shaping its environment in return. The plasticity of the brain offers a margin of improvisation with regards to genetic necessity. There is an openness, a freedom to plasticity, a responsibility. The plastic substance is active, as opposed to the passivity of flexibility.

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<sup>74</sup> Malabou.



Only a crisis — actual or perceived — produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Milton Friedman and Rose D. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, 1962).

What makes the notion of plasticity such a powerful tool for imagining the future is its inherent 'improvisational ability', far from a supposed 'cybernetic frigidity'. Its capacity to transform, without losing itself, on the basis of what it receives. As Catherine Malabou puts it, 'to be conscious of the plasticity of one's brain is to give oneself the means to say "no"'. Plasticity is an agility, it allows for an active co-production, both derived from and impacting one's environment, assimilating while shaping the circumstances. Absorb change, but also perpetuate change. Thinking of the plasticity of the brain, of the plasticity of the subject, is thinking its political agency, its freedom, its response-ability<sup>76</sup> to its environment. The notion of plasticity is very useful to understand how we can become active and owner of the evolution of our socio economic environment, how one can express one's freedom in the responsibility of a political co-creation, very different to the submissive and passive flexibility that is being praised nowadays.

A very tangible experience of personal agility exercised and applied to political change may be illustrated as follows. I started practising Contact Improvisation while writing this essay, as part of my commitment to "embodied investigations". These are aimed at honing my own 'response-ability', at contributing through personal endeavours to a collective co-creation of what our new ecologies may be.

Contact Improvisation (CI) is a dance form defined as "an evolving system of movement"<sup>77</sup> initiated in 1972 by American choreographer Steve Paxton. It is "an open-ended exploration of the kinaesthetic possibilities of bodies moving through contact".<sup>78</sup> It is a field where dancers both offer support and rely on other bodies as support to move, prompted by what touch signals, using gravity and weight sharing to create or disrupt balance and momentum, with no set choreography. It is a form of interaction which embraces and is explorative of difference, seen as a field of possibilities. It relies on acute "listening" -with all senses- and on trust and it is supportive by nature. CI posits the body as the most trusted starting point to establish truthful and ethical connections to others. If a touch "feels right", it is right. If a touch "feels wrong", it is wrong. A strict etiquette states that one ought to move towards what feels right, and to move away from what feels wrong.

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<sup>76</sup> Adam Benjamin.

<sup>77</sup> 'Contact Improvisation - About' <<https://contactquarterly.com/contact-improvisation/about/>> [accessed 2 June 2022].

<sup>78</sup> 'Contact Improvisation - About'.

The world is no longer 'other', but a field of play that is mutual - a rather wonderful word 'mutual', which denotes not only 'shared', but has its roots in the Latin *mutare* - to change.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Adam Benjamin.

This is the most important rule of that space. This means that the body, the senses, inform the ethics. For its practitioners, the discipline is a fascinating laboratory to explore new ways of encountering and being together, of supporting one another. This is why CI is highly political. It is a space where one learns to substitute a predatory logic with a collaborative one. A space for training one's body and mind to value and welcome the unpredictable and build creatively from it. A space shaping minds and bodies to interact in entirely new ways with the world around, leaving us more agile and better equipped to navigate unexplored territories and deftly respond to the unexpected, characteristic of post-pandemic times. More agile and better equipped to design sustainable forms of being together.

In a moment of human history where the body is kept at bay, and where touch is perceived as growingly threatening, CI posits (reinstates) the body a reliable site of documentation - through listening to other bodies and one's environment, feeding an instinctive decision-making process that bypasses rationality. Here the body shifts from an object of knowledge (and mastery) to a site of learning which relies on the unknown as a valid starting point to spontaneous decisions, where 'mistakes' are merely seen as paths of exploration. The absence of set choreography or instruction eliminates pre-ordained outcomes of the field of action. This encourages constant (re)examination and questioning that produces unique, singular, creative, 'on-the-fly' solutions.

Applied to a whole generation, a pedagogy cultivating this sensibility, principles and skills would undoubtedly produce a radically different reaction to authority than the hierarchical disciplinary-based technical education as we know it, where listening to instructions and complying to pre-set rules and models is favoured.<sup>80</sup> For Paxton, CI could 'reclaim' the potential that 'culture (has) suppressed or selected out', thereby freeing the unaware, conditioned and inhibited 'voluntary slaves' that are produced by our social structures with the aim to maintain and reinforce existing arrangements of power. While training our listening skills and our agility on the dance floor, while practising support and trust, while spreading these skills and values outside of its boundaries, scattering across the world, we dancers may contribute to shaping the future too.

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<sup>80</sup> Robert Turner, 'Steve Paxton's "Interior Techniques": Contact Improvisation and Political Power.', *TDR (1988-)*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Fall 2010), pp. 123-135 (13 pages)

## CONCLUSION

Although political structures around the world responded to the threat of the Coronavirus with rigid policies and military-enforced isolation, this crisis paradoxically allowed for intimate, visceral experiences of how interconnected and interdependent we humans and Nature are. Of what it means to be parts of a global body, encompassing humans, Nature - and possibly other agents yet to be identified, that are caught up with one another.

What this means is that the fragmentary and unilateral character of human actions is a dangerous illusion. Humans, their systems and structures do not operate in a vacuum. They are meshed with and traversed by heterogeneous systems that are not mere human constructions and have a logic of their own. This challenges recent dominant ideologies to a great extent, but simultaneously offers a formidable opportunity: far from stripping humans from their agency, locating it within larger agencies may strengthen it. Becoming aware of our interconnectedness may lay an efficient foundation for the elaboration of a new ethics, allowing for a more sustainable living together. The social and political implications of such awareness are staggering. It requires that we contemplate what it means for both humans and nonhumans to coexist in what may be seen as a 'post-anthropocene era'. This will entail a new social contract, new relations between subjects, bodies, objects and their environments.

At the root of this endeavour, I believe that not only public policies but also personal practices may repair and renew our relationship to the world we both live in and shape: practices embedded with environmental and social concerns, that foster mutual support, value collaboration above competition and cultivate a sensibility for ethics. Regenerative and inclusive practices that may connect us, in a virtuous cycle, to the possibilities of a more viable future together. Although these 'everyday activisms' may barely be visible in the public arena, I am convinced they hold a powerful potential for change, acting as singular 'bodies of resistance' activating, fomenting a revolution from within.

Revolution is immanent by nature. It opposes scattered, disorganised and messy positions of questioning to the upright certainty of established apparatus of ideological control. It is a

fuzzy horizontality undermining a sharp verticality. Although precarious and inefficient, these endeavours are highly effective to dismantle flawed structures of power.

Because this crisis awakened us to the vulnerability of our material entanglements, I believe it is by foregrounding these very limitations that we may lay long lasting foundations for a new social contract. While coming to terms with our shortcomings and acknowledging the implications that this has for ourselves and others, rather than trying to systematically overcome them, we may demonstrate how potent a site the wounded flesh may be, from which to create a more sustainable living together. Or rather, how potent sites the multiplicity and diversity of wounded flesh intimacies may be. As explored in my practice, it may be right there that the politicality, strength and significance of what is discarded, regarded as 'useless' or deemed 'irrelevant' reside.

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